

**William Phips & the Treasure  
of the  
*Nuestra Señora de la Concepcion***

Excepts from  
*Magnalia Christi Americana or the Ecclesiastical History of New-England*  
*The Life of His Excellency Sir William Phips, Knight*  
by  
Rev. Mr. Cotton Mather  
Pastor of North Church, Boston, New England  
1697

Introduction and Notes  
by  
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In 1687 an expedition led by William Phips of the Massachusetts Bay Colony succeeded in finding and salvaging a Spanish galleon, sunk on a reef a little north of what is now the Dominican Republic. A good friend of Phips wrote this story of the salvage a decade later, first published in 1702.

In the 1980s and 1990s, and again in 2014, I had the great personal privilege of playing a role in the salvage of another great treasure, the gold and silver carried on board the S.S. *Central America*. This story from over three centuries ago has many parallels with our own story of search and salvage. Some of the coincidences are similar enough to be almost uncomfortable. Although my life's circumstances are quite different to those of Phips, (it is, after all, three centuries later,) I can readily identify with his struggles and his triumph. Phips and his company failed in their first efforts to locate the treasure of his dreams. So did we. Phips then had to seek further funding. So did we. These and other aspects of the story are personally very familiar, and when I first read them I instantly connected with the subject of the account.

The author, Cotton Mather, was the Pastor of the North Church in Boston. He was the son of Increase Mather and the grandson of Richard Mather, both also prominent Puritan ministers of early colonial Massachusetts. The Mather family were very influential figures in the dominant religion of the region. Cotton Mather writes well, clearly in the style of his day, complete with what the modern reader will notice are abundant interrelated phrases separated by what will seem like an endless abundance of commas. Some will think his style is

thick, but here is the flavor of its age, the second and third generation of early colonial America, an age of kings and privateers.

This account by Cotton Mather is only an excerpt of his story about his friend William Phips, a member of the congregation at North Church in Boston. The reader should be advised that the Reverend Mather's account is heavily influenced by his manner of viewing and portraying many aspects of life through his deeply rooted religious convictions. His account could be regarded as strictly a hagiography, but the narrative contains many colorful descriptions and facts, and the modern reader can perceive much "between the lines." Mather clearly thought the world of his friend, and he used him as a symbol of virtue that others should emulate. He could not help but turn the account into a sermon of sorts. The biographer knew his subject well. It was, in the author's own words, "Written by one intimately acquainted with him." Here is a virtually contemporary account of a treasure hunt and salvage conducted over 300 years ago, a story written only a decade after the event.

William Phips was an early pioneer American, born in 1650 in the wilderness of what would become the state of Maine. As a youth he tended sheep, then became apprenticed as a ship carpenter. He was intelligent and enterprising, and since he had higher aspirations he took his talents to Boston. As his shipbuilding and business skills developed he became interested in shipwrecks, and he heard tales about rich Spanish galleons sunk in the Indies. This interest led him to raise funds in London for pursuit of a great treasure. He failed in his first efforts, and faced mutiny on multiple occasions. But he persevered, raising more money to continue his treasure hunt. Ultimately he succeeded, and his triumph upon arrival in London with the riches culminated with the lowly born William Phips being knighted. His rising fame and influence led to his appointment as Captain-General and Governor in Chief of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. His biography is maybe the greatest true rags-to-riches story of its age.

I have abridged the account, selecting excerpts that narrate the story of Phips's youth and early adulthood, up through his successful salvage of "a mighty treasure."

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Further notes on the style: The spellings, punctuation and emphasis (*italics*) are all the same as found in the re-printed edition published by Silas Andrus & Son, Hartford, 1855, which is presumably identical to the style of the original publication in 1697. English spelling did not become standardized until Dr. Samuel Johnson published his dictionary in 1755, so the reader will encounter many unfamiliar and archaic forms.

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### The account:

For my reader now being satisfied that a person's being obscure in his origin is not always a just prejudice to an expectation of considerable matters before him, I shall now inform him that this our Phips was born February 2, A. D. 1650, at a despicable plantation on the river of Kennebeck, and almost the furthest village of the eastern settlement of New-England. And as the father of that man which was as great a blessing as England had in the age of that man was a smith, so a gun-smith – namely, John Phips, once of Bristol – had the honour of being the father to him whom we shall presently see made by the God of Heaven as great a blessing to New-England as that country could have had, if they themselves had pleased. His fruitful mother, yet living, had no less than twenty-six children, whereof twenty-one were sons; but equivalent to them all was William, one of the youngest, whom his father, dying, left young with his mother, and with her he lived, “keeping of sheep in the wilderness,” until he was eighteen years old.

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His friends earnestly solicited him to settle among them in a plantation of the east; but he had an unaccountable *impulse* upon his mind, perswading him, as he would privately hint unto some of them, “that he was born to greater matters.” His first contrivance was to bind himself an apprentice unto a ship carpenter for four years; in which time he became a master of the trade that once, in a vessel of more than *forty thousand tuns*, repaired the ruins of the earth; Noah's I mean; he then betook himself an hundred and fifty miles further a field, even to Boston, the chief town of New-England; which being a place of the most business and resort in those parts of the world, he expected there more commodiously to pursue the *Spes Majorum et Meliorum* (hopes of greater and better things) – hopes which had inspired him. At Boston, where it was that he now learned first of all to *read* and *write*, he followed his trade for about a year; and, by a laudable deportment, so recommended himself, that he married a young gentlewoman of good repute, who was the widow of one Mr. John Hull, a well-bred merchant, but the daughter of one Captain Roger Spencer, a person of good fashion, who, having suffered much damage in his estate, by some unkind and unjust actions, which he bore with such patience, that for fear of thereby injuring the publick, he would not seek satisfaction, posterity might afterward see the reward of his *patience*, in what Providence hath now done for one of his own *posterity*.

Within a little while after his marriage, he indented with several persons in Boston to build them a ship at Sheeps-coat River, two or three leagues eastward

of Kennebeck; where having launched the ship, he also provided a lading of lumber to bring with him, which would have been to the advantage of all concerned. But just as the ship was hardly finished, the barbarous Indians on that river broke forth into an open and cruel war upon the English; and the miserable people, surprized by so sudden a storm of blood, had no refuge from the infidels but the *ship* now finishing in the harbour. Whereupon he left his intended *lading* behind him, and, instead thereof, carried with him his old neighbours and their families, free of all charges to Boston; so the first *action* that he did, after he was his own man, was to save his father's house, with the rest of the neighbourhood, from ruin; but the disappointment which befell him from the loss of his other *lading*, plunged his affairs into greater embarrassments with such as had employed him.

But he was hitherto no more than beginning to make scaffolds for further and higher actions! He would frequently tell the gentlewoman his wife that he should yet be *captain of a King's ship*; that he should come to have the *command of better men* than he was now accounted himself; and that he should be the owner of a *fair brick-house* in the Green-lane of North Boston; and that, it may be, this would not be all that the providence of God would bring him to.

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Being thus of the true temper for doing of great things; and upon the advice of a Spanish wreck about the Bahamas, he took a voyage thither; but with little more success than what just served him a little to furnish him for a voyage to England; whither he went in a vessel, not much unlike that which the Dutchmen stamped on their first coin, with these words about it: *Incertum quo Fata ferant*. (None can tell where Fate will bear me.) Having first informed himself that there was another Spanish wreck, wherein was lost a mighty treasure, hitherto undiscovered, he had a strong impression upon his mind that *he* must be the discoverer; and he made such representations of his design at White-Hall, that by the year 1683 he became the *captain of a King's ship*, and arrived at New-England commander of the Algier-Rose, a frigot of eighteen guns and ninety-five men.

To relate all the dangers through which he passed, both by sea and land, and all the tiresome trials of his *patience*, as well as of his *courage*, while year after year the most vexing accidents imaginable delayed the success of his design, it would even tire the patience of the reader: for very great was the experiment that Captain Phips made of the Italian observation, "He that cannot suffer both good and evil, will never come to any great preferment." Wherefore I shall supercede all *journal* of his voyages to and fro, with reciting one instance of his conduct, that showed him to be a person of no contemptible capacity. While he was captian of the Algier-Rose, his men growing weary of their unsuccessful

enterprize, made a mutiny, wherein they approached him on the quarter-deck, with drawn swords in their hands, and required him to join with them in running away with the ship, to drive a trade of piracy on the South Seas. Captain Phips, though he had not so much of a weapon as an ox-goad, or a jaw-bone in his hands, yet, like another Shamgar or Samson, with a most undaunted fortitude, he rushed in upon them, and with the blows of his bare hands, *felled* many of them, and *quelled* all the rest. But this is not the instance which I intended: that which I intend is, that (as it has been related to me) one day while his frigot lay *careening*, at a desolate Spanish island, by the side of a rock, from whence they had laid a bridge to the shoar, the men, whereof he had about an hundred, went all but about eight or ten to divert themselves, as they pretended, in the *woods*; where they all entered into an *agreement*, which they signed in a ring, that about seven o'clock that evening they would seize the captain, and those eight or ten which they knew to be true to him, and leave them to perish on this island, and so be gone away unto the South Seas to *seek their fortune*. Will the reader now imagine that Captain Phips, having advice of this plot but about an hour and half before it was to be put in execution, yet within *two hours* brought all these rogues down upon their knees to beg for their lives? But so it was! For these knaves considering that they should want a *carpenter* with them in their villainous expedition, sent a messenger to fetch unto them the carpenter, who was then at work upon the vessel; and unto him they shewed their *articles*; telling him what he must look for if he did not subscribe among them. The carpenter being an honest fellow, did with much importunity prevail for one half hour's time to consider the matter; and returning to work upon the vessel, with a *spy* by them set upon him, he feigned himself taken with a fit of the colick, for the relief whereof he suddenly run unto the captain in the great cabbins for a *dram*; where, when he came, his business was only, in brief, to tell the captain of the horrible distress which he was fallen into; but the captain bid him as briefly return to the rogues in the woods, and sign their articles, and leave *him* to provide for the rest. The carpenter was no sooner gone but Captain Phips, calling together the few friends (it may be seven or eight) that were left him aboard, whereof the gunner was one, demanded of them, whether they would stand by him in the extremity which he informed them was now come upon him; whereto they replied, "They would stand by him, if he could save them;" and he answered, "By the help of God he did not fear it." All their provisions had been carried ashore to a tent, made for that purpose there; about which they had placed several great guns to defend it, in case of any assault from the Spaniards, that might happen to come that way. Wherefore Captain Phips immediately ordered those guns to be silently drawn and turned; and so pulling up the bridge, he charged his great guns aboard, and brought them to bear on every side of the tent. By this time the *army of rebels* comes out of the woods; but as they drew near to the tent of provisions, they saw such a change of circumstances, that they cried out, "We are betrayed!" And they were soon confirmed in it, when they heard the captain

with a stern fury call to them, "Stand off, ye wretches, at your peril!" He quickly saw them cast into a more than ordinary confusion, when they saw *him* ready to fire his great guns upon them, if they offered one step further than he permitted them: and when he had signified unto them his resolve to abandon them unto all the desolation which they had purposed for him, he caused the *bridge* to be again laid, and his men begun to take the provisions aboard. When the wretches beheld what was coming upon them, they fell to very humble entreaties; and at last fell down upon their knees, protesting, "That they never had any thing against him, except only his unwillingness to go away with the King's ship upon the South-Sea design: but upon all other accounts, they would chuse rather to live and die with him than with any man in the world: however, since they saw how much he was dissatisfied at it, they would insist upon it no more, and humbly begged his pardon." And when he judged that he had kept them on their *knees* long enough, he having first secured their *arms*, received them aboard; but he immediately weighed anchor, and arriving at Jamaica, he turned them off. Now, with a small company of other men he sailed from thence to Hispaniola, where, by the policy of his address, he fished out of a very old Spaniard (or Portuguese) a little advice about the true spot where lay the wreck which he had been hitherto seeking, as unprosperously as the chymists have their *aurisick stone*: that it was upon a *reef of shoals*, a few leagues northward of Port de la Plata, upon Hispaniola, a port so called, it seems, from the landing of some of the *shipwrecked* company, with a boat full of plate, saved out of their sinking frigot: nevertheless, when he had searched very narrowly the spot, whereof the old Spaniard had advised him, he had not hitherto exactly lit upon it. Such thorns did vex his affairs while he was in the Rose-frigot; but none of all these things could retund the edge of his expectations to find the *wreck*; with such expectations he returned then to England, that he might there better furnish himself to prosecute a *new discovery*; for though he judged he might, by proceeding a little further, have come at the right *spot*; yet he found his present company too ill a crew to be confided in.

So *proper* was his behavior, that the best noblemen in the kingdom now admitted him into their conversation; but yet he was opposed by powerful enemies, that clogged his affairs with such demurrages, and such *disappointments*, as would have wholly discouraged his designs, if his patience had not been *invincible*. "He who can wait, hath what he desireth." Thus his indefatigable *patience*, with a proportionable *diligence*, at length overcame the difficulties that had been thrown in his way; and prevailing with the Duke of Albemarle, and some other persons of quality, to fir him out, he set sail for the *fishing-ground*, which had been so well *baited* half an hundred years before: and as he had already discovered his *capacity for business* in many considerable actions, he now added unto those discoveries, by not only *providing* all, but also by *inventing* many of the instruments necessary to the prosecution of his intended *fishery*. Captain Phips arriving with a ship and

a tender at Port de la Plata, made a stout canoo of a stately cotton-tree, so large as to carry eight or ten oars, for the making of which *periaga* (as they called it) he did, with the same industry that he did every thing else, imploy his own *hand* and *adse*, and endure no little hardship, lying abroad in the woods many nights together. This *periaga*, with the tender, being anchored at a place convenient, the *periaga* kept busking to and again, but could only discover a *reef of rising shoals* thereabout, called "The Boilers," -which, rising to be within two or three foot of the surface of the sea, were yet so steep, that a ship striking on them, would immediately sink down, who could say how many fathoms, into the ocean? Here they could get no other pay for their long *peeping* among the *boilers*, but only such as caused them to think upon returning to their captain with the bad news of their total disappointment. Nevertheless, as they were upon the return, one of the men looking over the side of the *periaga*, into the calm water, he spied a *sea feather*. Growing, as he judged, out of a rock; whereupon they bad one their Indians to dive, and fetch this feather, that they might, however, carry home *something* with them, and make, at least, as fair a triumph as Caligula's. The diver bringing up the feather, brought therewithal a surprising story, that he perceived a number of great guns in the *watery world* where he had found his feather; the *report* of which *great guns* exceedingly astonished the whole company; and at once turned their despondencies for their ill success into *assurances* that they had now lit upon the *true spot* of ground which they had been looking for; and they were confirmed in these assurances, when, upon further diving, the Indian fetcht up a *sow*, as they stiled it, or a lump of silver worth perhaps two or three hundred pounds. Upon this they prudently *buoyed* the place, that they might readily find it again; and they went back unto their captain, whom for some while they distressed with nothing but such *bad news* as they formerly thought they must have carried him: nevertheless, they so slipt in the sow of silver on one side under the table, where they were now sitting with the captain, and hearing him express his resolutions to wait still patiently upon the providence of God under these disappointments, that when he should look on one side, he might see that *odd thing* before him. At last he *saw* it; seeing it, he cried out with some agony, "Why! What is this? Whence comes this?" And then, with changed countenances, they told him *how* and where they got it. "Then," said he, "thanks be to God! We are made;" and so away they went, all hands to work; wherein they had this one further piece of remarkable prosperity, that whereas if they had first fallen upon that part of the Spanish wreck where the pieces of eight had been stowed in bags among the ballast, they had seen a more laborious, and less enriching time of it: now, most happily, they first fell upon that room in the wreck where the bullion had been stored up; and so they prospered in the *new fishery*, that in a little while they had, without the loss of any man's life, brought up *thirty-two tuns* of silver; for it was now come to measuring of silver by *tuns*. Besides which, one Adderly, of Providence, who had formerly been very helpful to Captain Phips in the search of this wreck, did, upon former agreement, meet

him now with a little vessel here; and *he*, with his few hands, took up about *six tons* of silver; whereof, nevertheless, he made so little use, that in a year or two he died at Bermudas, and, as I have heard, he ran *distracted* some while before he died. Thus did there once again come into the light of the sun a treasure which had been half an hundred years *groaning under the waters*: and in this time there was grown upon the plate a crust like limestone, to the thickness of several inches; which crust being broken open by iron contrived for that purpose, they knocked out whole bushels of rusty pieces of eight which were grown thereinto. Besides that incredible treasure of plate in various forms, thus fetched up, from seven or eight fathom under water, there were vast riches of *gold*, and *pearls* and *jewels*, which they also lit upon; and, indeed, for a more comprehensive *invoice*, I must but summarily say, "All that a Spanish frigot uses to be enriched withal." Thus did they continue *fishing* till their provisions failing them, 'twas time to be gone; but before they went, Captain Phips caused Adderly and his folk to swear, that they would none of them discover the place of the wreck, or come to the place any more till the next year, when he expected again to be there himself. And it was also remarkable, that though the sows came up still so fast, that on the very last day of their being there they took up twenty, yet it was afterward found, that they had in a manner wholly cleared that room of the ship where those *massy things* were stowed.

But there was one extraordinary distress which Captain Phips now found himself plunged into: for his men were come out with him upon seamen's wages, at so much *per* month; and when they saw such vast litters of silver *sows* and *pigs*, as they called them, come on board them at the captain's call, they knew not how to bear it, that they should not *share* all among themselves, and be gone to lead "a short life and a merry," in a climate where the arrest of those that had hired them should not reach them. In this terrible distress he made vows unto Almighty God, that if the Lord would carry him safe home to England with what *he* had now given him, "to suck of the abundance of the seas, and of the treasures hid in the sands," he would ever devote himself unto the interests of the Lord Jesus Christ and of his people, especially in the country which he did himself originally belong unto. And he then used all obliging arts imaginable to make his men true unto him, especially by assuring them that, besides their wages, they should have ample *requitals* made unto them; which if the rest of his employers would not agree unto, he would distribute his *own share* among them. Relying upon the word of one whom they had ever found worthy of their *love*, and of their *trust*, they declared themselves *content*; but still keeping a most careful eye upon them, he hastened back for England with as much *money* as he thought he could then safely *trust* his vessel withal; not counting it safe to supply himself with necessary provisions at any nearer port, and so return unto the wreck, by which delays he wisely feared lest all might be lost, more ways than one. Though he also left so much behind him, that many from divers parts made very



considerable voyages of *gleanings* after his *harvest*; which came to pass by certain Bermudians compelling of Adderly's boy, whom they *spirited* away with them, to tell them the exact place where the wreck was to be found. Captain Phips now coming up to London in the year 1687, with near *three hundred thousand pounds sterling* aboard him, did acquit himself with such an exemplary honesty, that partly by his fulfilling his assurances to the seamen, and partly by his exact and punctual care to have his employers defrauded of nothing that might conscientiously belong unto them, he had less than *sixteen thousand pounds* left unto himself; as an acknowledgement of which *honesty* in him, the Duke of Albemarle made unto his wife, whom he never saw, a present of a golden cup, near a thousand pound in value. The character of an *honest man* he had so merited in the whole course of his life, and especially in this last act of it, that this, in conjunction with his other serviceable qualities, procured him the favours of the greatest persons in the nation; and "he that had been so diligent in his business, must now stand before Kings, and not stand before mean men." There were indeed certain mean men – if base, little, dirty tricks, will entitle men to meanness – who urged the King to seize his whole cargo, instead of the tenths, upon his first arrival; on this pretense, that he had not been rightly informed of the *true state of the case* when he granted the patent, under the protection whereof these particular men had made themselves masters of all this mighty treasure; but the King replied, that he had been rightly informed by Captain Phips of the whole matter, as it now proved; and that it was slanders of one then present which had, unto his damage, hindered him from hearkning to the information; wherefore he would give them, he said, no disturbance; they might keep what they had got; but Captain Phips, he saw, was a person of that honesty, fidelity, and ability, that he should not want his countenance. Accordingly the King, in consideration of the service done by him, in bringing such a treasure into the nation, conferred upon him the honour of knighthood; and if we now reckon him a *knight of the golden fleece*, the stile might pretend unto some circumstances that would justifie it. Or call him, if you please, "the knight of honesty;" for it was *honesty with industry* that raised him; and he became a mighty river, without the running in of muddy water to make him so. Reader, now make a pause, and behold *one raised by God!*

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### **Phips Medal: Betts-67 (sometimes called the Silver Shoals medal)**

According to Betts, this medal was given to the officers and promoters of William Phips's 1687 salvage effort on a sunken Spanish galleon, *Nuestra Señora de la Concepcion*, which sank off the north coast of what is now the Dominican Republic in 1641. The effort netted a reported value of £300,000. The investors were headed by Christopher, Duke of Albemarle, who was also Governor of Jamaica. According to the 1702 account by Cotton Mather, who knew William Phips personally, a gold version of this medal was presented to Phips when he was knighted.

The medal is composed of silver salvaged by Phips from the *Concepcion* in 1687. It measures 54.6 mm (2.15 inches) in diameter, and it weighs 66.5 grams (2.14 troy ounces.)

The obverse depicts James II and his consort Mary of Modena. James II was the King of England and Ireland (and also James VII of Scotland) who ruled from the death of his brother Charles II on February 6, 1685 to the official date of his abdication, December 11, 1688 (as determined by Parliament) following the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688.

All text on the medal is in Latin.

The obverse text reads, "IACOBVS II ET MARIA D G MAG BRIT FRAN ET HIB REX ET REGINA" – translated: "James II and Mary, by the grace of God, King and Queen of Great Britain, France and Ireland"

"GB" in the lower margin indicates that the engraver was George Bower, one of the engravers at the Royal Mint, 1664 – 1690, according to Betts.

Note: The use of "King of France" by the English monarch dates back to a claim Edward III put forth in 1338 (beginning the Hundred Years War,) and it was long maintained as it is here, in spite of the fact that King Louis XIV of France was James the Second's cousin and ally.



The reverse depicts William Phips's ship, the frigate *Algier-Rose*, and salvagers working among the shoals north of the island of Hispaniola. The salvagers can be seen on a small boat amidst the shoals in the foreground, with a line extending into the water. A second boat is near the ship.

The upper text reads, "SEMPER TIBI PENDEAT HAMUS" – often translated, "Let thy hook hang" or alternately, "Let the hook hang from thee always," a reference to the 17<sup>th</sup> century salvagers' tools of the trade. The phrase is a quote from Ovid, *Ars Amatoria III* 425, and it acknowledges the value of perseverance. According to Mather, Phips had been aware of the *Concepcion* shipwreck for at least four years before he found it. In pursuit of the treasure he thwarted mutinous plots among his crew. His first expedition to the area ended in failure, so he sailed to England and sought more funding from "the Duke of Albemarle, and some other "persons of quality." He invented instruments "necessary to the prosecution of his intended fishery." Finally his patience and diligence paid off.

The lower text reads, "NAVFRAGA REPERTA 1687" – translated, "Shipwreck discovered 1687"



#### References:

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